

ETHICAL REPORTING ON GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE IN NORTH MACEDONIA



Analysis and practical
recommendations for media

— Skopje, 2023



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Introduction

Media play an important role in formation of societal attitudes and values and have immense potential to be an instrument for social changes. According to the research conducted by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Services, there is still 'widespread portrayal of women in media through the framework of marriage and family' by maintaining the traditional roles of women and emphasizing stereotypes¹.

On the other hand, the comprehensive study on women's well-being shows that 60% of women in North Macedonia consider that violence against them is common, and almost three out of ten consider that it occurs very frequently². Compared to the average in the EU countries, women in North Macedonia consider that domestic violence is a private matter that should stay within the family³.

This attitude, combined with the lack of knowledge about the existing specialised services for protection of the victims of domestic violence⁴, results in serious violations of women's rights.

Sexism and sexist behaviour manifests across the total spectrum of human activity, including the cyberspace (Internet and social media)⁵. Increased activity on the Internet has provided new dimension to the expression and dissemination of hate speech against women to the wider audience.

However, the root of the problem is in the long-lasting and historically maintained gender inequality, not as a problem of technological achievements. In fact, violence against women that happened, or still happens offline had spilled over online as a new form of violence that requires

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- 1 Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. Research – Analysis of gender issues and representation of women and man in broadcasters' programmes, 2022. Available at: [Programme Analyses – Агенција за аудио и аудиовизуелни медиумски услуги \(avmu.mk\)](#)
 - 2 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Well-Being and Safety of Women: OSCE-led survey on violence against women: North Macedonia, 2019.
 - 3 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Well-Being and Safety of Women: OSCE-led survey on violence against women: North Macedonia, 2019.
 - 4 Idem.
 - 5 Recommendation CM /Rec (2019) by the Committee of Ministers adopted by the Council of Europe on 27 March 2019.

new and stronger measures to fight and prevent violence in cyber-space.

International standards for the protection of human rights have long demanded gender-responsive approach to safety of women, whereas increasing number of research on national level showcased serious problem with the gender-based violence, including online violence⁶.

Media and civil society organisations invest efforts to improve the situation, but obviously they are insufficient.

In order to better understand how media report, including online media, this document provides an overview of the current legislation, as well as of the policies and practices of reporting on violence against women.

The ratification of the Istanbul Convention has accelerated the processes for amendments of the national legislative framework and introduced new standards for prevention and protection from violence

against women. The Istanbul Convention encourages media to introduce manuals and self-regulating standards, in order to strengthen the respect for dignity of women and contribute to prevention from violence against them⁷. These standards should result by refraining from harmful gender stereotypes and from spreading a demeaning image of women. Thus, it is important that these measures are taken with due respect of the basic principle on which the functioning of media is founded, freedom of expression, freedom of media and freedom of artistic expression.

There to, the purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate how media, particularly those online, inform about the cases of gender-based violence against women, expressed through its different forms: rape, sexual violence in all its manifest forms, including sexual harassment, psychological and physical violence, as well as stalking as a new form recognised with the latest additions to the legislative framework for prevention and protection against violence.

6 Petkovska, N. Leshoska V. For Whom the Internet is a Safe Place, 2021. Available at: <https://glasprotivnasilstvo.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Za-kogo-internetot-e-bezbedno-mesto-finalno.-docx.pdf>

7 Council of Europe. Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 2011.

Through the interviews and the questionnaires for media workers, the needs of media were determined, as well as the challenges they face and potential solutions for their more active involvement in the prevention of violence against women.

For more illustrative presentation how reporting can influence enhancing gender stereotypes, and thereby contribute to preventing or encouraging violence against women, the analysis reviews specific examples of reporting on cases of gender-based violence against women. In recent years (2020-2022) the case 'Public Room' was in the public eye, and it appeared through several phases, with media reporting about the case from various perspectives.

In this case, a larger number of victims were affected, some of them minors, who were exposed to various forms of violence committed through a computer system.

In the same period, media reported about a case of sexual violence against a girl who publicly spoke about the case, and for which the Public Prosecutor's Office issued an order to end the investigation, leaving the victim without protection against physical and sexual violence.

This case is also interesting for analysis from the perspective of the actions taken by the Public Prosecutor's Office to prove the existence of the criminal act rape, which triggered reactions in the public, which were reported by the media.

All of these findings, collected through various methodological tools, serve to formulate the practical recommendations for ethical and responsible reporting on gender-based violence and they are integral part of this document.

Methodology

The purpose of the analysis is to assess how media, particularly online media, in North Macedonia report on all types of gender-based violence against women.

The analysis is produced within the project Prevention and Protection against Gender-Based Violence in North Macedonia, implemented by the United Nations Population Fund. The goal of the project is to support the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia in introducing and implementing integrated policies on gender-based violence across the country, in accordance with the principles of the Istanbul Convention. The project supports the implementation of the Istanbul Convention through wide partnership and development of a comprehensive legal framework on policies, which further enables quality multi-sector services, strengthens data management, targets perpetrators and their acts, and strengthens media influence in order for women and girls to feel free from all forms of violence and threat of such violence.

Therefore, sensitisation of media is of key importance in the process of operationalisation of the law and improvement of services. The process of

sensitisation of media entails education and information of media professionals on gender-based violence, its primal reasons, its influence, as well as the principles of the Istanbul Convention.

The findings from the analysis will be a basis for formulating the recommendations for ethical reporting about all forms of gender-based violence.

The methodological framework of the analysis is based on a desk-analysis, legal analysis, analysis of data collected from field research with in-depth semi-structured interviews and a survey with a questionnaire for media – members of the Registry of Professional Online Media (Promedia)⁸, as well as case studies for two separate cases of gender-based violence.

The desk analysis is based on secondary data sources and includes the collection, review and analysis of available reports, analyses, documents and data related to media representation of gender-based violence against women.

Data sources that are used are documents and data from relevant domestic and

international institutions, reports and analyses from civil society organisations related to the topic which is the subject of interest of this analysis.

The legal analysis is based on primary and secondary data and includes analysis of international documents, laws, by-laws and policies related to violence against women and its representation in media. The analysis includes a critical review of the existing advantages and disadvantages of the legal framework and the degree of law enforcement in regard to professional reporting on cases of gender-based violence. The legal analysis also includes an overview of the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, which is crucial for establishing a balance between freedom of expression and the right to protect the private life of individuals.

The analysis of the primary data includes the analysis of the data collected through the conducted 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews with experienced journalists and/or editors.

The interlocutors have professional journalistic experience for more than a decade. Out of the total number of

interviewed interlocutors, 8 are editors, 4 are journalists. Journalists and editors from all media, both national and regional/local were interviewed, in order to get a clearer picture of the reporting on gender-based violence. Thus, 67% of the interviewees are from traditional media, while 33% are from online media. Five of the interviewees are men and six are women. Six media are national and six are regional, that is, local. Additionally, data for situational analysis was collected through an online questionnaire distributed to journalists and editors of online media – members of the Registry of Professional Online Media (Promedia).

The case study research method, which includes an in-depth examination of the subject (the case), was also applied. This method was applied to analyse media coverage of two cases of gender-based violence. The goal was to understand how media frame such cases, what narratives they promote and how they can influence understanding and the public's response to gender-based violence.

Due to the large volume and diversity of media content, representative examples were chosen that could provide useful insight into the practices and role of the

media, that is, the framing of cases of gender-based violence in media discourse.

Two cases were selected for analysis. The first case is the so-called 'Public Room' case, in which a larger group of women and girls were affected, whose private photos and videos were shared on the social network Telegram by thousands of men.

This case triggered reactions in the public in several time intervals, that is, from the first announcements about the group's existence in January 2020 to the several subsequent announcements about its renewal or about groups with similar content; after the administrators were identified, proceedings were initiated and court rulings were issued against several individuals for establishing and administering the group. For the purposes of this analysis, several periods were considered (20-30 January, 2020; 27 January – 9 February 2021 and 9-13 March 2022) that is, the periods when media reported most frequently on the case.

The second case is the case of a female rape victim, who spoke publicly about the violence she suffered and the manner in which institutions acted in resolving cases of sexual violence against women.

For this case also media reported in several phases, that is, when institutions made decisions about the investigation and (non)processing the case to the competent court. For this analysis, two periods were considered (1 February – 8 March 2022 and 28 January – 3 February 2021), that is, the periods when media reported most frequently about the case.

Legal Framework

The basic international human rights instruments, including those for the protection of women's rights, were adopted before the emergence and development of information and communication technology, but still provide rights and obligations with transformative potential and play a key role in the promotion and protection of rights, including the rights of women to live free from violence, but at the same time to enjoy the freedom of expression, access to information, the right to privacy and other rights guaranteed by international, regional and domestic legal documents.

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) recognises a continuum between gender stereotypes, gender inequality, sexism and violence against women and girls. The acts of the everyday micro aggressions, articulated through seemingly unwanted or minor sexual behaviours, comments and jokes, are humiliating and contribute to a social climate in which women are humiliated, their activities reduced, and choices

limited, both in the public and private spheres.

Sexist hate speech can escalate and incite abusive and threatening actions, which sometimes result in sexual abuse, violence, rape and death. In response to this situation, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women imposes an obligation on the state to take measures to amend the social and cultural customs in the behaviour of men and women, in order to eliminate prejudice and any other practice based on the perception of inferiority or for the superiority of one or the other sex and for the preservation of the traditional role of men and women⁹. In its final conclusions about the situation in North Macedonia, the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women expresses concern about discriminatory behaviour online, which includes hate speech against women and girls on social media¹⁰.

Women's access to technology is also affected by intersectional forms of

9 Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Article 5, [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Professional Interest/cedaw.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw.pdf)

10 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women CEDAW/C/MKD/CO/6. Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 2018, p.21.

discrimination based on numerous factors, such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, ability, age, class, culture, religion, and others. The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, in the 2018 report, highlights that women with multiple identities are often the target of online violence based on a combination of these factors. Some groups of women, such as human rights defenders, women in politics, journalists, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, women with disabilities and women belonging to marginalised groups are a particular target of violence through ICT¹¹.

At the regional level, the Council of Europe has been calling for a long time for elimination of stereotypical representation of women in media, which also contributes to the prevention of violence against women¹².

Tackling gender stereotypes will contribute to the reduction of inequality, including gender-based violence, which is one of

its most serious manifestations. Following several recommendations, the Council of Europe, with the adoption of the Istanbul Convention as a legally binding document, gave an additional impetus to the implementation of the long-term goals for prevention and the fight against all forms of violence.

The Istanbul Convention encourages the private sector, the ICT sector and the media to participate not only in the preparation of local, regional or national policies and efforts for the prevention of violence against women, but also to participate directly in the implementation of laws¹³.

At the national level, the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence of 2021 recognises for the first time any form of gender-based violence against women in cyber-space¹⁴. The Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence of 2021 for the first time explicitly defines and indicates the

11 Human Rights Council. Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective. A/HRC/38/47, nap.28.

12 Recommendation No. R (84)17 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on equality between women and men in the media; Recommendation 1555 (2002) by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the image of women in the media; Recommendation 1799 (2007) by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the image of women in advertising; Resolution 1751 (2010) and Recommendation 1931 (2010) by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on combating sexist stereotypes in the media.

13 Council of Europe. Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 2011.

14 Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 24/2021. Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

specificity of sexual harassment online, which, unfortunately, is not reflected in the amendments and additions to the Criminal Code adopted in January 2023 year.

Internet violence is recognised only in the definition of violence against a child in the Criminal Code¹⁵. However, the Criminal Code, even before the adoption of the amendments this year, provides protection against violence that occurred through a computer system and gives the institutions the opportunity to act effectively in the protection of victims of gender-based violence on the Internet.

Regarding the role of media in the prevention of violence against women, an important progress in the legal framework is the recognition of the media as a stakeholder in the implementation of the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

Namely, media outlets established in accordance with the Law on Media have an obligation, when creating and broadcasting informative and educational programmes, to take into account the raising of awareness among the general

public for all forms of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence, promote gender equality and influence the elimination of stereotypes about gender roles¹⁶. At the same time, there should be respected the freedom of expression and the independence of media's editorial policy guaranteed by the Constitution and with international ratified agreements.

Taking into consideration that the effective resolution of this issue will inevitably have to take into account the basic principle of media independence, self-regulatory measures may not give a satisfactory answer.

Therefore, the task mainly falls on media themselves, which should incorporate the principle of equal presentation and fair treatment of different persons with their specific identities in professional codes and self-regulatory mechanisms and to fight stereotypes as everyday practice.

The Law on Media prohibits the publication of content in media that, among other things, encourages or spreads discrimination, intolerance or hatred based on race, sex, religion or nationality¹⁷.

15 Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 36/2023. Law on Amendments and Additions of the Criminal Code. Violence against a child, in addition to violence from paragraph (21) of this article entails also psychological violence, violence on the Internet, peer bullying/violence as well as stalking and following the child.

16 Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 24/2021. Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Article 37.

17 Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 184/2013 и 13/2014. Law on Media, Article 4.

Research shows that online media are becoming a mainstream source of information, second in terms of consumption and influence (immediately after TV), but for most of the journalists, experts, educated and elder audiences, they consider a large part of them to be unreliable and offer the audience a large amount of information that is far from ethics and adequate public discourse, and is increasingly closer to propaganda and hate speech¹⁸. According to data from the State Statistical Office, in the first quarter of 2022, 86.6% of households had access to the Internet from home. Of the total population aged 15 to 74 years old, 88.3% used the Internet and 73.9% used it several times a day¹⁹.

With the 2014 amendments to the Law on Media, the provisions that refer to electronic media are deleted, and the impression is created that there is no framework for them that will regulate their content. However, it is important to emphasize that there is still a legal possibility to demand responsibility for published content that is contrary to the provisions of the Criminal Code, especially

for crimes committed through a computer system; the injury of personal data and, of course, the latest changes with the recognition of new forms of gender-based violence, psychological violence and stalking as criminal acts.

The Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence prohibits the publication of information and data that verbally, non-verbally, or with other actions of a sexual nature have the purpose or consequence of harming dignity, or create a threatening, hostile, humiliating or intimidating environment, access or practice through electronic means of communication²⁰.

Additionally, the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination treats harassment, i.e. sexual harassment, as a form of discrimination that is prohibited in all areas, including public information and the media²¹.

Freedom of expression and information is an inviolable democratic value guaranteed by the Constitution, laws and international ratified documents. However, the

18 Macedonian Institute for Media. Analysis: Macedonia in the Digital Age - Between Rights and Responsibilities when Communicating on the Internet. 2015. Available at: [ANALYSIS: Macedonia in the digital age - between the rights and responsibilities while communicating on Internet \(mim.org.mk\)](https://www.mim.org.mk/ANALYSIS/Macedonia%20in%20the%20digital%20age%20-%20between%20the%20rights%20and%20responsibilities%20while%20communicating%20on%20Internet)

19 State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia: <https://www.stat.gov.mk/ErrorPage/404.aspx?aspxerrorpath=/%20PrikaziSoopstenie.aspx>

20 Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 24/2021. Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Article 3, Paragraph 1, Line 20.

21 Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No 259/2020. Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence, Articles 3 and 10.

restrictions on the freedom of expression and information are regulated *inter alia*, by the Law on Civil Liability for Defamation and Insult, where reference is made to the use of the standards of the European Court of Human Rights for determining the limits for the enjoyment of freedom²². According to the ECtHR, media play an essential role in a democratic society. Although, they should not overstep certain boundaries, especially in regard to the reputation and rights of others, yet it is their duty to convey, in a manner consistent with their own obligations and responsibilities, information and ideas on all matters of public interest. Not only do they have the task to broadcast such information and ideas: the public also has a right to receive them. Otherwise, the media could not play its vital role of 'public watchdog'²³.

However, reporting on cases of gender-based violence touches the private life of victims and their families, which is also protected and imposes restrictions on freedom of expression. The Law on Personal Data Protection provides separate rules for processing personal data for journalistic purposes, i.e. permitted publication of personal data

only if the public interest prevails over the private interest of the subject of the personal data²⁴. In balancing the right to protection of personal data with freedom of expression and information, the nature of personal data is taken into account; the circumstances under which the personal data was obtained; the influence of the published information on the discussion of the public interest; how well known the person concerned is and who is the subject of the information; previous behaviour and consent of the person concerned, as well as the content, form and consequences of publishing the information.

In the cases in which the ECtHR had to balance in the protection of private life versus freedom of expression, in practice it emphasizes the contribution that the publication of the photo or text in media has in the debate of general interest²⁵. The problem of gender-based violence against women is a matter of public interest that deserves attention from several aspects, including the perspective of the victims. However, how they are represented is important to the public discourse on violence against women.

22 Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 251/2022 Law on Civil Liability for Defamation and Insult, Article 2.

23 See *Thoma v. Luxembourg*, 2001, § 5.

24 Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 42/2020 and 294/2021. Law on Personal Data Protection, Article 81.

25 See *Eerikäinen and others v. Finland*, 2009, § 62.

According to the ECtHR, the definition of what constitutes the general interest depends on the circumstances of the case. Thereto, the existence of such an interest does not apply only to cases of political issues or crime, but may concern other topics (sport or art)²⁶.

Regarding the importance of websites in the realisation of freedom of expression, the ECtHR emphasizes that '[and] in light of its accessibility and its capacity to store and communicate vast amounts of information, the Internet plays an important role in improving public access to news and facilitating the dissemination of information in general'²⁷. Expressive activities generated by Internet users provide an unprecedented platform for the exercise of freedom of expression²⁸. In one of the most significant cases concerning online media, the ECtHR held that the responsibility of Delfi, an online news portal, is a justified and proportionate restriction of the portal's right to freedom of expression. It was because the comments were significantly offensive, the portal failed to prevent them from becoming public, profited from their existence, allowed their authors to remain anonymous.

Balancing the freedom of expression and information, against the protection of the right to private life of the persons about whom the media writes, requires integrity and professionalism in the performance of journalistic work. The Istanbul Convention encourages the private sector, the ICT sector and the media to establish guidelines, self-regulatory standards, in order to promote the respect of women and to contribute to the prevention of violence against them. This entails adopting professional ethical standards that will be based on human rights, will be gender sensitive and will cover the problem of violence against women in a non-sensationalist manner. Code of Ethics of Journalists as a document sets the standards of professional work, which also applies to online media. The Code guarantees the protection of the right to private life and the obligation for media to avoid intruding into the private life of individuals²⁹.

Topics regarding personal tragedies should be considered carefully, addressed with compassion and preservation of privacy. When reporting on cases of domestic violence, names and photos of the victims, or data that can indirectly reveal the

26 See Von Hannover v. Germany [No. 2], 2012, § 109.

27 See Times Newspapers Ltd v. the United Kingdom (nos. 1 and 2), nos. 3002/03 and 23676/03, § 27, ECHR 2009.

28 See Delfi AS v. Estonia [GC], no. 64569/09, § 110, ECHR 2015.

29 Association of Journalists. Code of Ethics of Journalists. [CODE OF ETHICS OF JOURNALISTS – Здружение на новинари на Македонија \[znm.org.mk\]](http://www.znm.org.mk)

identity of the victim or the perpetrator, will not be published before the competent institutions officially publish them. In reporting about rape victims or victims of sexual violence, the identity of the persons will not be disclosed without the consent of the victim, and when it comes to children – without the permission of the child's parents or guardians³⁰.

Having in mind that in the recent period there has been a dynamic development of international and regional standards for protection from violence against women, recently translated and in the national legislation, there is clearly a need to constantly educate journalists and media workers about the different forms of violence, about the context in which it happens, about the intersectional identities that make certain groups of women more vulnerable to violence and about other aspects important in fulfilling the purpose of the Law.

Therefore, the provisions stipulate the obligation of the media, independently or through the professional associations of journalists and media workers, to cooperate in order to strengthen their capacities for professional reporting on issues related to violence against women and domestic violence.

30 Council on Media Ethics. Guidelines on Ethical Reporting for Online Media – Application of the Code of Ethics of Journalists Online. <https://www.semm.mk/dokumenti/korisni-resursi/kodeks/850-nasoki-za-etichko-izvestuvanje-na-onlajn-mediumite%20>

Analysis of the State of Media Reporting on Gender-Based Violence

RESULTS FROM CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS

Media play a key role in shaping public opinion and in understanding the problem around gender-based violence. However, the treatment of this problem in media can be full of challenges, difficulties, ethical dilemmas, inconsistencies, but also opportunities.

In order to better understand the perspectives of journalists and editors on this issue, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 12 people. It is a deliberately selected sample of persons based on their role and experience in reporting on gender-based violence or, persons who participate in developing the editorial policy in the media outlet.

The purpose of these interviews was to obtain insight from individuals who have specific knowledge, experience, perspectives and suggestions regarding media reporting on gender-based violence.

The sample, although not statistically representative of all journalists and editors, offers an in-depth understanding

and insight into the complexity of the problem. Participants provide authentic perspectives, resulting from their professional roles and experiences. These perspectives are key to understanding the nature of gender-based violence reporting, its challenges and the potential to improve reporting/informing. The following presents the results of these interviews, including key themes that emerged from the data, as well as recommendations for how media can improve their coverage on gender-based violence.

MEDIA PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN RAISING AWARENESS AND EDUCATING THE PUBLIC ABOUT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Media are expected to recognise gender-based violence as a problem that needs to be addressed and explained to the audience in an appropriate way. *It is a very sensitive topic, which should be of significant public interest, because we can all be potential victims at some point and we should know how to protect ourselves³¹.*

Thus, it is recommended that media prepare a larger number of contents with which, in practice, the victims of gender-based violence will be encouraged to report the problem to the competent institutions, at the same time becoming familiar with their rights. *With continuous reporting, with guests on the show, psychologists, information about shelters, creators of regulations, videos, the public will get an adequate picture of that problem, if we want its feedback.*

It is useless if we recognise it, but do not report gender-based violence and do not raise awareness about the problem.

Therefore, the media has a very important role in sensitising citizens about this problem, both from a scientific and a social angle. *The audience should, firstly, be educated about how to prevent this phenomenon, but also to familiarise themselves with the legal regulations that protect citizens from violence.*

Despite the agreement among the interviewed interlocutors that media largely play a significant role in the education of audience, however, the need to do it very carefully and in a systematic way is emphasized.

They should be careful when publishing news and other information about gender-based violence. They can do that through more detailed and continuous information about the problem.

It is considered that media reporting can contribute to the reduction of cases of gender-based violence. *I have witnessed it personally, on air in a programme, speaking from the angle of the gender aspect of domestic violence, and the viewers indicated to me that they were not aware that, for example, they were subject to some form of economic violence.*

MEDIA ARE AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN ENCOURAGING SOCIAL DIALOGUE

Addressing gender-based violence and eradicating it requires coordinated efforts that go beyond individual acts of support and intervention. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage a wider social dialogue, in which media undoubtedly play a major role. Interlocutors point that if media take part in encouraging such dialogue, they will contribute not only to raising awareness and education about gender-based violence, but also to debunking stereotypes, exposing of the motives behind such violence and the promotion of accurate and truthful information.

Interviewed interlocutors consider that that the social dialogue on these issues can be encouraged by referring to the need for institutions to respond to cases of gender-based violence. *The institutions must also be involved and it must be monitored what will happen, what solution and development there will be in the future.*

Encouraging social dialogue implies emphasis on the systemic problems and inconsistencies that need to be solved collectively. *It involves recognising the wider societal factors that contribute to gender-based violence and discussing the underlying problems that perpetuate it.*

While individual stories and experiences are important to illustrate the consequences of gender-based violence, it is crucial to carefully and respectfully consider the specific circumstances in which the survivors found themselves. Generalizing individual examples, according to the recommendations, should be done carefully, to avoid further stigmatization or revictimization of survivors. It is especially important what kind of messages will be broadcasted from the journalistic content. *We need to know what is the message we want to send to the audience to whom we serve the information.*

Most interlocutors explain that they encourage social dialogue around this topic by introducing different perspectives in journalistic products, that is, those of experts, representatives of state institutions or non-governmental organisations. *We choose the appropriate format, for example, shows that address topics of a social nature, and we discuss them in order to make the problem more visible and have a greater effect.*

THE ISSUE IS NOT A PRIORITY IN REPORTING FOR DIFFERENT REASONS

All interviewed interlocutors unanimously confirm that topics related to gender-based violence are not given priority in reporting or, it is seldom done. More serious media may take a more sombre approach to reporting on gender-based violence, but this usually boils down to daily journalism. The interlocutors assess that the situation in smaller newsrooms and in online media is far more serious. *We, the smaller newsrooms, are in a race against time to publish as much as possible information, perhaps walking the path of least resistance to get information in an easier way. More engaged texts need more time.*

Most of the interlocutors believe that the reason for this is that daily political events dominate the media. *Everything is somehow centred on that daily political reporting, and maybe also because of political pressure on the media. We also know that there are not so many independent media in the country.*

Frequently, the challenge for newsrooms to report on these issues is the lack of resources, that is, the scarce number of staff. Additionally, newsrooms do not have the capacities to enable journalist to work on specific rubrics. For example, in all four newsrooms of the non-majority communities in the public broadcaster, the number of working journalists is

three in each, which is a small number for preparing the programme and thereto the importance is given to current daily events. *We still do not have journalists that will work only on that issue.*

Lack of adequate education or skills is also cited as a problem. Journalists, according to some of the interlocutors, do not often specialise in these topics, that is, they are not sufficiently familiar with the problems in reporting on gender-based violence. *They are led from the market demand, in order to get more clicks, especially online media and to report irresponsibly.*

A challenge can be also seen in the absence of sources of information, given that, quite often, the victims of gender-based violence do not want to speak publicly. *We as a newsroom always try to find ways to overcome the dilemmas that exist with the sources, by providing guarantees that the identity will not be revealed, that the voice will be changed during editing and the face will be blurred.* Editors and journalists also react that there is a lack of expert sources on this topic.

There is also a lack of conversations about the advancement of the collegium, about listening to the voice of younger journalists in the newsroom, *because nowadays they have a very different view of things.*

Apart from the above-mentioned challenges, some of the interlocutors consider that, in general, there is a lack of

will and interest to report on these topics. *They are not given enough space, probably because there is overwhelming perception that it is not news that will have readership and likes.*

The problem is sometimes the insensitivity of the male population that is at the top of the media regarding these topics. *I would not generalize, but there are such cases, there is not enough education among journalists about the public interest in covering these topics.*

I am a woman, editor-in-chief, and I attach great importance to these issues.

CHANGES ARE ALSO NEEDED IN MEDIA EDITORIAL POLICIES

Basically, the editorial policy in the media has a key influence in terms of informing about these topics. *The editor is the one who can change the text of the journalists entirely and put it in a format that suits him/her.*

The need to involve all employees and the editorial staff in sensitisation about these issues is also underlined. According to the interlocutors this would allow more reporting on these issues, not only when a more serious event would occur, or when there are organised events for some occasion, or within campaigns or marking certain days. *There should not be reporting only when something happens. Not only*

when a woman is murdered. We, the media are most active then.

Editors are advised to enable this issue to be addressed permanently, not only in the news, but also in debate shows, as well as entertainment and education programmes. At the same time, it is recommended to involve media in campaigns that will create a call to action for this problem. *It really is a big problem, victims often report and then withdraw. Media should also be involved in such campaigns. For example, on the Day for ending violence against women. Campaigns will encourage them to respond.*

Interlocutors underline that frequently these topics are covered during the weekend. *It is assumed that weekends are less eventful and when you have a slightly less important topic in an empty news edition, and it is addressed with dramatization, without rushing, then it is different. Such topics take time.*

REPORTING IS SCARCE, THERE IS LACK OF CONTINUITY AND A COMPLETE PICTURE ABOUT THE PROBLEM

Stories about gender-based violence lack continuity, and themes do not follow from start to finish. *It all comes down to ready-made information they have, use it, and that is where the work practically ends. It is not uncommon for topics to be reported*

when an issue becomes topical on social networks, after which the topic remains on the air for a short time and then is forgotten.

The need to dive deeper, to get to the bottom of this phenomenon, which requires more knowledge is underlined. Hence, it is necessary to hear the opinion of institutions and experts in order to get the broader picture. Stories about gender-based violence usually do not have an epilogue in media reporting. Despite the fact that the public is interested in following these topics, the fact that they are not a priority means that citizens receive scarce information. *When we constantly keep the story visible, it will also be talked about. But when we inform only once, then not everyone hears about it, with the continuity of informing we keep the topic high on the agenda.* The interlocutors consider that, with a detailed explanation of the problem, continuous support will be provided to the victims and responsibility will be demanded from the perpetrators and from the institutions of the system. The detailed explanation of the problem implies including several parties, responsible institutions with their own statements, statistics, but also presenting recommendations from the civil sector. *Greater expertise should be offered regarding the problem.*

Another problem is that only press releases from the Ministry of Interior are broadcast, without any additional journalistic intervention in the content. *We just simply transmit. And here our work*

stops. There is no in-depth research of these issues, there is no research on how gender-based violence happened, what caused it, what are the consequences and causes. It is much more important to point out the cause of the problem than of the event itself and personal stories, which should only serve as an illustration of the problem.

Even when reporting on a topic, the important perspectives that could be included in the journalistic information, which would ensure continuity, are not followed or taken into account.

There was a case when the partner physically abused and killed the woman from another town. Suddenly the daughter posted a status after a few days, but no one called her to record her, to explain. They just shared the status. She wrote emotionally, she had lost a parent, she criticised the institutions, no journalist called her to ask what they were facing, to get a clearer picture.

For a more comprehensive treatment of the problem in media reporting, it is recommended that it should be addressed in different rubrics and features, depending on the type of media. *There can be recorded podcasts, created sub sites, shows.*

For such topic, should there is will and there is space and editorial will, minimum 5-6 stories can be created and keep the focus.

SOCIAL NETWORKS HAVE A DETRIMENTAL EFFECT ON REPORTING ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

A large part of the interviewed interlocutors react that significant portion of misinformation and even hate speech is generated through social networks.

There, to a degree, you see the general awareness of citizens about this topic. And you see that when something happens and when media start reporting, there are such extremes that remind us what needs to be done.

Most remarks about the harmful influence of social networks refer to the spread of graphic and explicit content related to gender-based violence, which can repeat the trauma of the survivors, but also of the public in general. Interlocutors point that social networks are becoming a platform for victim blaming and online bullying. Survivors of gender-based violence often face threats or incriminating comments, which can discourage them from sharing their stories or seeking justice through media. *If a woman is physically abused, there are comments like 'she asked for it herself'. People have no empathy for such problems, they look for a problem with the victim. It has started to be seen as something normal in our society. Victims are not given a chance to speak up until it is too late. Only when it becomes part of the crime news, then space is found.* The interlocutors assess that exactly such comments distract attention from the

news itself and defocus from the problem.

Quite sensational content appears on these networks, which spreads quickly and causes harm to the victims and their environment. The interlocutors refer to the need for critical evaluation and confirmation of information before it is used in reporting.

ETHICS IS (NOT) A PRIORITY IN REPORTING

With regard to the sensitive nature of the issues and the potential impact on survivors, it is essential that journalists adhere to ethical standards in reporting.

When reporting on gender-based violence, primarily, the need to adhere to the general provisions of the Code of Ethics for Journalists of the Republic of Macedonia, especially Articles 7 and 8, is emphasised. As a reminder, Article 7³² underlines the need for protection of privacy, whereas Article 8³³ outlines the rules when reporting on accidents, tragedies, etc., while it is strongly recommended to avoid sensationalism in reporting. Media outlets are expected to protect not only the identity and privacy of the victims, that is, the survivors of gender-based violence, but also their loved ones.

However, according to the interlocutors, the reality indicates the opposite. Sensationalism is among the most frequently cited problematic phenomena in reporting on gender-based violence. *Any irresponsible and sensationalist reporting creates a basis for spreading disinformation.* Sensationalism is present in the headlines, to start with. *As if there is a race to insert a more dramatic title, without going into the essence.* Sensationalism, according to most respondents, is mostly present in online media. Frequently one comes across headlines in the media that only encourage readers to open some content, only to find numerous distortions in it. *In such texts, nothing is observed, it often happens that the names and surnames of the attacker and the victim can be read, a police jargon is used and nothing else.*

Reporting about the problems of the LGBTI-community is particularly seen as problematic. *Most of the time, the reporting is cynical even in the title itself, the subtitle and in the description of their problem, even if the media outlet tried to present their problem with the best intentions. When various comments with hate speech and stigmatisation appear on social media under such contents, it becomes a huge problem, which only multiplies.*

For those reasons, it is pointed that one needs to be cautious when

32 Code of Ethics of Journalists of Macedonia [CODE OF ETHICS OF JOURNALISTS – Здружение на новинари на Македонија \(znm.org.mk\)](#)

33 Ibid.

conveying views of interlocutors that are discriminatory or contain hate speech. *The public needs to know that the spread of such attitudes can also incite violence.*

All interlocutors point to the need for media to be extremely careful and not present the identity of those who survived gender-based violence. *It is not information of public interest.*

I would go so far as to not use initials for certain, very specific cases (such as the triple murder in Kavadarci). By publishing the initials, especially in smaller places, people know who it is. A narrative form, some kind of alias, can be used. It is in the public interest, our interest and the victim's interest that she is protected. And one should never reveal specific things related to anything about their private life.

It is also pointed out that social network profiles should not be used in public presentations of survivors, such as, for example, a screenshot of a personal profile.

On the other hand, there are different opinions regarding the public presentation of survivors of gender-based violence. *I would insist that the interlocutor does not go public. But if they insist, I would start the interview by outlining the possible risks and explicitly asking why they decided to speak publicly.*

Journalists and editors also point to the need to be careful about the vocabulary

used in reporting on gender-based violence and avoid sensationalist expressions, such as, for example, 'family dramas', 'love quarrels', 'love triangle', 'violation (instead of rape)', 'horror', 'terror', etc.

As if one is reporting about an episode of a soap opera. Such broadcast and sensationalizing of gender-based violence leads the audience to see it as something that is out there, not in the home next to us. Or, with the explanations for those who committed the violence of the type 'well, he was a quiet and reserved man', 'they were very quiet, they were very withdrawn', 'he was a family man'. Such romanticizing of violence or using sensationalist headlines is a serious problem, which does not help in preventing future cases. Media like to have strong headlines, for example 'He beat her to death' or something similar to grab attention, through dramatic elements.

Everyone is unanimous that the correct terms should be used when it comes to this phenomenon. In this context, the usefulness of the Glossary of Gender-Based Violence Perpetrated by the (Mis)Use of Technology³⁴, published by UNFPA, was highlighted. *It can also be very useful for media outlets in defining terms.*

A problem in reporting is also the lack of different perspectives, that is, sources in informing. Most of the interlocutors, as was stressed above, state that they are usually informed from the bulletin of

the Ministry of Interior, without further attempts to obtain more information. In this context, the need to consult experts is highlighted, that is, to include all important perspectives.

The fact that some media outlets frequently convey news for this issue from the region that has no informational value for this society is also seen as a problematic phenomenon. *It is especially problematic when such information is downloaded from dubious portals or from social networks, without verifying the origin of the information and knowing the name of the author.*

Almost all interviewees (11 out of 12 interviewees) stress the need of applying ethical approach in the treatment of survivors. It is especially important that victims are not forced to reveal details of the violence they suffered. *There is a need for empathy for the victim, to get into the shoes of the one who decided to speak, the one who has trouble, a problem. To find the root of the problem, the core. No sensationalism, no harm.* Journalists have a serious role in directing these people. *The victim who calls is desperate, asking for help. Maybe she sought help from institutions, maybe she did not know where to turn, you have to guide her. The journalist has a serious role, there must be integrity, the victim must believe, at that moment she just wants to be helped.* Furthermore, another significant role of media is to encourage the process of reintegration of the victims, i.e. to

provide them with conditions for further functioning.

The ethical approach in the visualization of journalistic content about gender-based violence is also important. According to the interlocutors, this is highly significant because visualisation has the power to shape public perceptions, influence understanding of such complex issues, and evoke emotional responses. In this context, special care should be taken to respect the dignity of survivors and to the accuracy and context of the representation. *Consideration should be given to the potential impact of visualisation on the survivors and audiences. And, of course, to avoid revictimization.*

NETWORKING AND COOPERATION TO TACKLE THE PROBLEM MORE EFFECTIVELY

Networking and cooperation between media and other stakeholders is crucial for a coordinated response to gender-based violence. Such cooperation, the interlocutors say, will allow messages and stories to reach a wider audience, raising awareness of this problem. Networking with other media, civil society organisations and associations is recommended in order to jointly understand the problem.

Civil society is considered particularly useful stakeholder with the potential to support newsrooms. Civil society organisations frequently have detailed information on given cases and are in direct contact with the survivors. They can also help refer victims of gender-based violence to the appropriate institutions. Besides, civil society organisations can help in building the capacities of newsrooms in this area. *This sector is much more accessible in terms of providing answers to questions, i.e. availability. Even some statistics that they have - the institutions do not have them.*

Psychologists and educators are also important stakeholders to be involved in promoting social dialogue on gender-based violence. Their expertise can provide useful insights and a deeper understanding of the challenges women face. By including their perspectives, media can bring greater visibility to issues and encourage a more inclusive and empathetic public discourse.

In addition to civil society organisations, other important actors for networking with media to tackle gender-based violence are legal experts, as well as healthcare professionals. Legal experts can provide guidance on laws and regulations related to gender-based violence, while healthcare professionals can provide medical and psychological support to survivors, as well as training to journalists and media professionals on how to report sensibly on these issues.

EDUCATION IS REQUIRED

Almost all interlocutors point to the need for education for newsrooms, regardless of the type of media in question. The lack of knowledge and skills on how to report this problem is underlined. *We, the journalists, do not know how to approach the victims of gender-based violence in order to take an appropriate statement. How to get the best out of it, to get through the trauma?*

There is no sensitivity among journalists on these issues. We can't just set up the microphone and expect them to speak. We need a suitable environment to make them feel free.

Hence, proper education will enable journalists to acquire skills to tackle sensitive topics, to interview survivors with empathy and respect, and to produce comprehensive and balanced stories.

Thereto, the interlocutors suggest introducing mentoring instruments within the newsrooms themselves, organising workshops, exchanging best practices, etc.

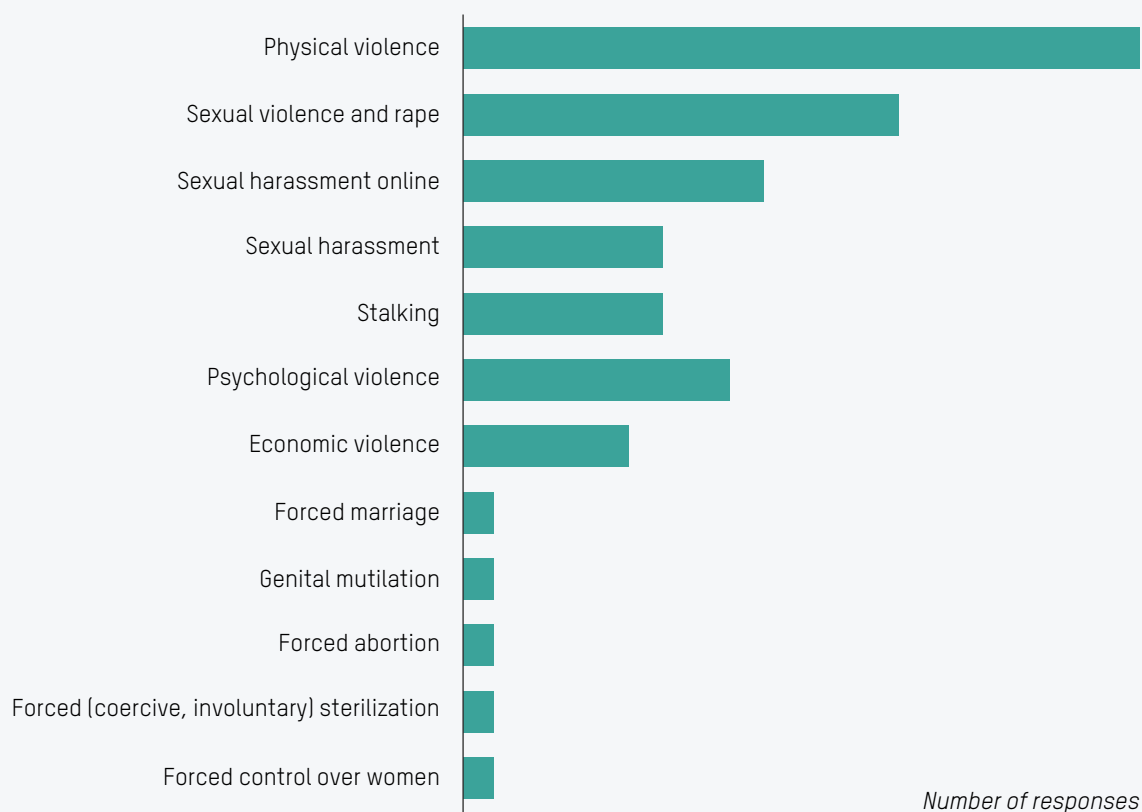
RESULTS OF THE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

This part of the analysis presents the results of the conducted survey with media outlets regarding their attitudes, experiences and recommendations in reporting on gender-based violence. The questionnaire was distributed to all online news media that are members of the Registry of Professional Online Media - Promedia, established by the Council for Media Ethics in Macedonia and the Association of Journalists of Macedonia. The decision to use the Registry of Professional Online Media as a framework for the sample is based on its focus on consolidating online media that have voluntarily committed to accept membership criteria, including compliance with the principles of professional journalism. From the Register, which currently has around 130 portals as members, a subgroup of 60 daily news portals was selected, which make up the sample for the research conducted through questionnaire. It is important to note that the sample excludes portals whose primary focus of information is not related to the issue of gender-based violence, such as those focused on sports, entertainment, economy, etc. From the total number of media outlets to which the questionnaire was sent, 33.33% answered the questionnaire by the designated deadline.

Almost all survey participants (19 out of 20) confirm that media reporting on gender-based violence can help raise awareness among citizens and prevent future incidents.

The data shows that physical violence is most often reported in the media, followed by sexual violence and rape, sexual harassment online and psychological violence.

The most commonly reported gender-based violence



Types of gender-based violence

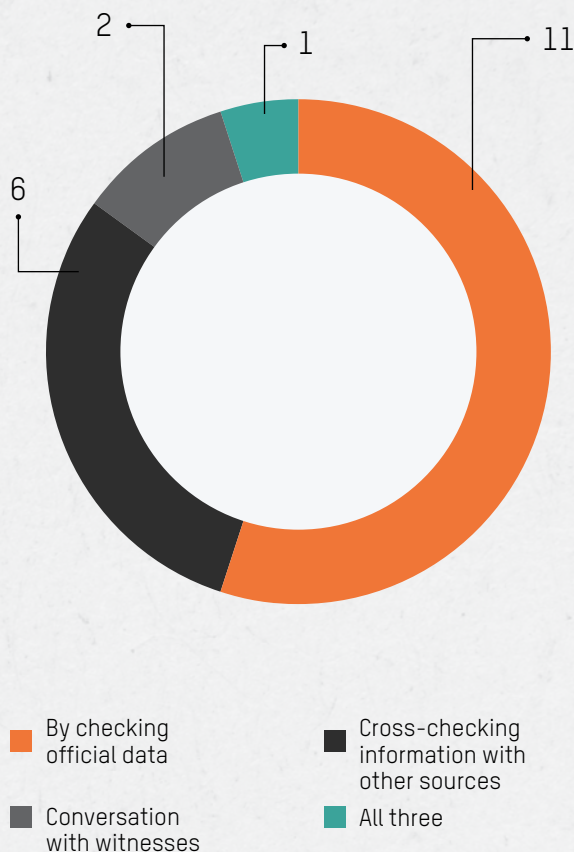
Responses by journalists indicate the different approaches they take to enable survivors of gender-based violence to be treated with sensitivity and respect in reporting. From the total

number of respondents, 55% say they avoid using visual elements with explicit details, followed by answers which highlight the inclusion of expert perspectives on the topic. Smaller portion (15%) answered that they enable survivors to tell their stories.

Furthermore, most respondents say they avoid using visualization or disturbing images when reporting on gender-based violence.

Regarding the ways to verify information, checking official data is most often practiced, followed by the cross-checking of the information with other sources.

Ways to verify information



Cases in which the perpetrator of gender-based violence is a high-profile person, or a person in power are usually treated in the same way as any other case. Fewer respondents answer that they do it with extra caution and sensitivity.

Regarding the difficulties faced by newsrooms to report regularly and timely about gender-based violence, the respondents mention it equally lack of human resources and insufficient understanding of the problem, followed by insufficient access to sources of information.

In addition to this, journalists and editors react that sometimes it happens that a witness changes their mind and retracts from the given statements.

Also the results of the questionnaire point to the problem of sensationalism in reporting, but also to the fact that journalists themselves often have prejudices regarding this problem.

In general, media outlets are expected to be more involved in conveying information about gender-based violence through *educational and informative content, with statistical data, real stories and accuracy in information on this topic, better cooperation by sharing information from institutions on local and national level, educational campaigns for recognition and prevention of gender-based violence.*

Furthermore, it is recommended that social services centres, have a press briefing at least once a month exclusively on this topic. In those briefings, they would not only raise the alarm about cases of gender-based violence, but would also explain how they treated the victim, they would inform the public if and how the law enforcement agencies reacted, so that citizens can follow the cases to the end, until the court verdict. In this context, the need to apply high standards is emphasized in the protection of the victim's personal data.

Case Studies

In the period January 2020 - December 2022, several cases of various forms of violence against women were published in media, which instigated a debate in the public, but also a reaction from the institutions responsible for the protection of victims of gender-based violence. For the purposes of this analysis, two cases were chosen: the Public Room case and the case of a girl, victim of rape for who the Public Prosecutor's Office stopped the proceedings. The time period during which these two cases were in the public eye is long and, at several intervals, media reported more intensively on them. Therefore, we decided to analyse the published material in several shorter intervals, when the frequency of information and the volume of journalistic content related to the specific cases were higher and can provide a clear picture of the way the media treats these two specific cases of gender-based violence against women.

THE CASE 'PUBLIC ROOM'

Brief description of the Public Room case.

The case includes a larger group of women and girls who were victims of sexual harassment online, i.e. whose private

photos and videos were published and shared with a larger group of men, without their consent, in a closed group on the social network Telegram, called 'Public Room'.

The group was founded and administered by several men, and in the meantime new members were added to the closed group. Personal photos and videos of women and girls, or photos taken from their social network profiles were shared in the group, as well as their personal contacts were shared, with disturbing and sexist comments. The case came to light in January 2020, when the Ministry of Interior informed that the group was closed. In January 2021, the media reported again that the Public Room Telegram group was still active and continuously shared photos, videos, phone numbers and other data of women and girls. In April 2021, the Public Prosecutor's Office filed an indictment against the creator and the administrator of the Public Room group, who are charged with a crime 'production and distribution of child pornography', after which in March 2022, the Basic Criminal Court issued a verdict convicting the defendants to four years in prison. For the purpose of the analysis, three periods were selected when the information about the Public Room case was most frequent in online media, and an analysis was made

of the content of the journalistic texts and the way in which the issue was addressed in public. The analysed periods are 25-31 January, 2020; 26 January – 10 February, 2020 and 8-14 March, 2022.

Qualification of the case by media. The first information about the existence of the Public Room group was published on 25 January, 2020, when several online media reported the information about high school students who reported to Radio MOF that their photos and videos, which they shared in a private message with peers, ended up in a closed group on the Telegram social network and were further shared with a larger group of people.

Initial media reports were – ‘In a closed Telegram group, Macedonian high school pupils share explicit photos of their peers’, and a section with sensationalist headlines raised the public alarm about the existence of a dangerous group – ‘What is the pornography group – among high school pupils – panic among teachers and parents’; ‘Pornography scandal in Macedonia, politicians and businessmen are part of a pornographic group’.

The reports state that the Ministry of Interior was immediately informed and that a reaction was expected. Dozens of media convey similar information that it is about videos and photos of naked high school girls, and the group in which the photos are shared has more than 7,000 members.

The first media reports convey information about the number of members in the group,

the assumed age of the administrators and members of the group, the content that was shared in the group, and other facts about the way the group functions. The key bit of information is missing, that a large number of women are victims of illegal behaviour by a larger group of men who shared information without the knowledge and consent of the victims.

On 26 January, 2021, media started writing about the Public Room case again. The report by one of the victims in the police station has encouraged a discussion in the public on whether the group was really closed, as the competent institutions informed a year ago, or during the entire period a large group of men continued to share photos and videos of women and girls. In addition to this, media also published excerpts from the communication in the group asking for the identity of the girl who reported the group, as well as the public shaming and threat of publishing additional materials of her. ‘The whore went to the police to report the group, that someone released a nude picture of her... Give me pictures so we can see her and we publish more, one by one. Make her have a nervous breakdown.’

In the same period, there was debate in media about the new Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, and in addition to the numerous texts that only convey brief information from the Ministry of Interior, a substantial analysis of the problem of domestic violence, profiling of perpetrators and victims and an analysis

of the institutional response to domestic violence is published.

It is obvious that through this case media took advantage of the moment that sex and pornography are taboo in our society, so they tried to capitalize through sensationalistic articles. When writing about the Public Room case, some media outlets use headlines such as, for example: 'Prostitution, sexual services: relaunch of the Public Room - the group where explicit photos were shared', without providing deeper analysis of the problem.

On 5 February 2021, media reported that the creators and administrators of the Public Room group were arrested and were ordered to be detained by the court. Again, out of 87 analysed texts, in only six the author uses other information in the text besides the broadcasted press release from the institutions, without qualification of events such as gender-based violence and the setting of the case Public Room in the wider social context. There is lack of presentation of the broader socio-political context of violence against women, qualification of the individual actions in the Public Room group with different types of gender-based violence, such as for example, stalking, sexual harassment, etc.

Whose voice is represented in the media. In about 5% of the analysed texts, statements by stakeholders are presented in media, i.e. the Facebook status of a high school teacher was first published, who qualified the event as 'degeneration

of the new generation of youth and a general decline in morale at all levels. This is utterly worrying, serious, warning that children, upbringing and their education are the most neglected priorities'. As a reaction to the media reports, on 25 January, 2020, they also uploaded a Facebook status of the Additional Deputy Minister of interior, Slavjanka Petrovska, who announced that the Public Security Bureau had launched an investigation into the case. On the very next day, 26 January 2020, media broadcasted official statements by Caretaker Prime Minister Spasovski and Additional Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy Shkrijelj: 'We are coordinating with the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Education and Science. I appeal to all parents whose girls are exposed to turn to the centres for social services, which will act in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior. We have already agreed with the Ministry of Education and Science that the professional services in the schools will take measures'. In the next few days since the outbreak of the case in public, media broadcasted Facebook posts or statements from human rights activists and experts as an additional perspective in the presentation of the case. The initial media reporting has no representation of the problem from multiple sides, and most of the time only one party is represented in the announcement – an institution, a civil society organisation or another interlocutor. There are only few texts where the author addresses the topic from several aspects, by explaining the legislative framework, the actions

taken by the competent institutions and through official statements by their representatives, statements by communications experts, professors and others. The voice of the victims is limited and is mostly presented through the statements of civil society representatives that work with victims of violence. There are posts where the victim talks about the experiences after her photo was published in the Telegram group and about the inappropriate treatment by the police after she reported the case. On 31 January 2020, media shared information from the Public Security Bureau that seven girls from Skopje, Kichevo, Tetovo and Shtip reported that their photos were misused in the Public Room group.

After media reported that the administrators of the Telegram group were discovered, some of their statements about the motives for opening and maintaining the group were published in the media, without a critical review of their responsibility for what they have done.

In the first few days after the case was published in media, it was treated as a high school teenage game that got out of hand, only to later find out that it was a serious group, mainly composed of adult men sharing photos and videos with pornographic content of women and girls of various ages.

In the second time interval of the analysis of the contents published in the period January - February 2021, there were testimonies of women who were victims in

the Public Room case and spoke publicly about the trauma, shame and fear of having their videos, photos and phone numbers shared.

Texts that dominate, i.e. about 90% of the analysed stories, address the issues unilaterally and/or convey information from the institutions or from the civil society organisations and their demands. However, in this period there are statements by MPs who in January 2021 voted for the new Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, so the topic of gender-based violence was more present in the media discourse compared to other periods of analysis. In addition, several media, encouraged by the developments with the Public Room case organised a wider debate on the topic of gender-based violence against women and girls and similar events in the region. Media covered the protest march that was held on 3 February and the messages that clearly qualify the case Public room as a crime for which the state is responsible for finding and sanctioning the perpetrators as well as protecting the victims.

Treating the case as gender-based violence. In the initial media reports and, subsequently, in the dominant public discourse after disclosure, the case was presented as a high school game that soon turns into a platform for the illicit exchange of photos and videos of a larger group of women and girls. The exclusion of the gender perspective and the absence of key words to describe the problem, such

as 'victim', 'perpetrator', 'gender-based violence', 'consent', 'sexual harassment', neutralise the problem and put in focus the girls who took photos and published on their social media profiles photos with pornographic content.

Media broadcast information from the institutions, but the event for the first time acquires the dimension of a case of gender-based violence against women through the broadcast statements of activists and associations who speak about the problem of the Public Room case through the prism of the causes and consequences of violence against women in society, which now, through this specific case, has spilled over online.

Under the headline: 'Peer and gender-based violence is an everyday problem facing young people in and out of schools', media broadcast the press release by the H.E.R.A. association as one of the few texts in media which in this early phase of publishing the case speaks about the deeply enrooted violence against women. 'We witness daily incidents, various forms of violence among young people that leave traces for their whole life and affect their psychophysical development. Too often young victims cannot recognise it or, if they do, have nowhere to report it. If you are looking for culprits, do not look at the youth. Their behaviours are a result, that is, a consequence of wrong systemic solutions, of the educational system and of the ignorance of adults about their problems.'

Through the text 'What does a child know about nudes', the Public Room case opened Pandora's box. The authors comprehensively and deeply analyse the case through the problem of gender-based violence against women and girls by presenting the experience of one of the many victims. Online violence is contextualised as gender-based violence which disproportionately affects women and girls, and through a statement from a psychologist, they represent the mechanisms for supporting victims in the school. The text analyses how the absence, that is, the introduction of comprehensive sexual education, can be the key to this type of problems. The text also presents a statement from the Ministry of Interior as the institution most called upon to give an explanation of the competences, the actions taken and what can be expected further.

The second major wave of reactions related to the Public Room case was triggered after one of the victims reported abuse of her photo and contact in the group. She publicly shared the experience after a friend informed her about the violation, as well as her attempt to report it to the Ministry of Interior. According to her post, she did not receive protection from the institutions because she was adult, and the text does not explain what is the legal loophole that leaves adult victims unprotected. On the other hand, the media broadcasted a call by the Ministry of Interior to all victims to submit reports and at the same time texts were published, with titles like 'Scandalous: Public Room is

relaunched, Mol washes off responsibility', which sends mixed messages to the public, especially to the victims of the Public Room case. It is evident that media outlets do not contribute much to a clearer representation of the problem, but mostly broadcast the views of one or the other side, i.e. what the institutions can and have done, what the victims have experienced and how this has a consequence for perpetrators.

The idleness of the institutions, especially the Ministry of Interior and the Public Prosecutor's Office, created an image in the public, supported by the media, that the victims are unprotected and the perpetrators are encouraged. Associations for the protection of women's rights reacted with a statement that was fully reported by the media, in which they demanded quick and efficient protection of the victims, treating the case as a serious case of sexual harassment of women and girls and improving the legislative framework regarding online harassment of women. The victims in the Public Room case are women and girls and the perpetrators are men, but the institutional discourse was mainly in the direction of qualifying the case as a violation of privacy, personal data and distribution of child pornography. In fact, the voice of the associations in media provides the correct qualification of the Public Room case as a case of gender-based violence on women who were subjected to stalking and sexual harassment through social networks.

The third period of analysis includes the

events in March 2022, when on the eve of International Women's Day, 8 March, civil society organisations conducted a support campaign to the victims of violence, indicating where the victims can report the violence and which are the competent institutions that act in case of violence against women. In media, for the analysed period, 52% of the posts are with research data regarding violence against women and girls, established services to support victims of violence, as well as the importance of the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic violence in tackling this problem.

On 11 March 2022, media reported the outcome of the criminal proceedings against the creator and administrator of the Public Room group, i.e. that they were sentenced to four years in prison for allowing sharing and spreading videos with minor girls with pornographic content. The media as usual conveyed the news from the court while several texts offer a broader analysis of the verdict and the absence of serious addressing of the problem. For example, the analysis showed that some media analyse the decision on the type of crime and the amount of the penalty through the prism of the fact that the lack of an appropriate legislative framework (referring to the then amendments and additions to the Criminal Code which were not adopted) limits the space for the institutions to act and sanction a larger number of people for various crimes resulting from the Public Room case. Such texts contribute

to the debate on the need for accelerated adoption of the amendments, in order to more effectively protect the victims of gender-based violence.

Protection of privacy. Media reports are followed by illustration of the content of posts in the Telegram group, screenshots from messages, photos with blurred faces, disturbing speech that it is used by members of the group against the women and girls whose videos and photos are shared. As early as the first few days of media reports, a victim spoke publicly, as her photo was shared by a media outlet reporting on the case and thus revealed that she too was a victim of Public Room. The victim first spoke out in public, but after being further exposed to harassing messages from members of the Public Room group, asked the media to retract the content related to her data.

The renewed media interest in the Public Room case in January and February 2021 was prompted by the report of one of the victims of Public room to the police. The media shared the victim's statements and her experiences with institutions that did not recognise her as a victim of a crime. Media outlets mainly broadcasted a video of her statement, sending an encouraging message to other victims, but what lacks is a broader analysis of the context, qualification of the violence, the legislative framework and acting by institutions in cases where the victims are adults. The public release of the identity of the survivors, though with their consent, and presenting their experience

in a non-judgmental way, in reality causes comments and reactions on social media, through which the victims are further and repeatedly victimised. Therefore, it is important that survivors give their consent after being well informed about the consequences that their appearance in media may have.

RAPING A GIRL

Brief description of the case 'Raping a Girl'

The case refers to a girl who was a victim of physical violence and rape by a former partner. Immediately after the event, she provided medical documentation with recorded injuries from the attack, and the case in which on 2 August 2020 she was beaten with fists, kicked and raped by her ex-partner, which she reported to the police station. After several months of silence on the part of the institutions, the girl, in January 2021, published the case in media, with the information that six months after the rape was reported, the Public Prosecutor's Office had not made a decision on whether to prosecute the perpetrator. During this period, media reported on the case, after which the Public Prosecutor's Office took actions to gather evidence. One of the investigative actions of the Public Prosecutor's Office was the reconstruction of the event, where the victim was directly confronted with the perpetrator in the process of proving the probability that physical violence and rape occurred. The outcome of the investigation

was that the Public Prosecutor's Office decided not to prosecute the perpetrator due to a lack of evidence that the elements of the crime of rape were met.

For the purpose of the analysis, three reporting periods by the online media have been selected, when reports about the case were most frequent and an analysis was made of the content of 50 journalistic texts and the way in which the case was treated in the public. Periods of analysis are 1-3 February 2021, 1-3 February 2022 and 2-4 March 2022.

Qualification of the case by the media.

The first information about the case was published in February 2021, when several media outlets reported that a girl from a town in North Macedonia has been waiting for six months for the Public Prosecutor's Office to take action to prosecute a perpetrator of physical and sexual violence for which she also submitted medical documentation. One of the television stations published a report with a statement from the victim about her experience, about reporting to the police, about the consequences she suffered after the event and about the support she received from her parents. The news story reports only a brief statement from the Public Prosecutor's Office that actions are being taken to gather evidence: 'We inform you that there is ongoing pre-investigation in the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office for the event you are writing about. The competent prosecutor is collecting the material and verbal evidence, after the consideration and analysis of which she/

he will make a public prosecutor's decision on the further course of the procedure.'

All media outlets that reported the event only published news from media that first reported the information, without delving deeper into the analysis of the socio-political context of the problem of gender-based violence and rape as one of the more severe forms of violence against women. It is positive that all the media in their reports qualify the event as rape, without using terms that relativize the seriousness of the crime. But the media in the initial period of reporting do not write about the typology of violence, for the motives for committing this type of crime, and there is no broader analysis of the roots, causes and consequences of violence against women, as well as the ways in which it can be prevented. All media reports are similar, albeit written by different authors, there are only variations in the titles of the posts. Several media outlets use a sensationalist approach in spreading the news through the headlines: 'A shocking confession of a young woman from Veles: Boyfriend beat and raped her, and for six months there has been no charge', '(The girl mentioned with her name) underwent an ordeal on the Skopje - Veles highway', etc.

One year after the first media report about the case, in February 2022, an internet portal published information about the course of the procedure and the actions taken by the Public Prosecutor's Office for collection of evidence. Under the title 'Prosecutor exposed the victim to trauma,

reconstructed car rape, in the presence of her and the bully', the public was informed that instead of protecting the victim, she was put in a situation to face the bully while third parties, actors from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, performed the actions of the event according to the statements of the victim and the perpetrator. Without further analysis of the information in the text about the applied reconstruction, it was further published in other media by different authors.

Whose voice is represented in media?

In the initial period of publication of the case in media, most of the content is repeated, given that it was taken from the media outlet that originally reported the news; the posts contain testimony of the victim, part of them contain a statement from the competent institutions, such as the 'Public Prosecutor's Office and/or the Institute of Forensic Medicine, and the actions they had taken. There is no additional analysis of the work of the institutions, explanation of the legislative framework, statistics about the scope of the problem, statements by experts, organisations, etc. The voice of the victim is presented through her initial statement about the experience of the rape and the consequences she faced as a result of the crime, but also because of the failure of the institutions to protect her in a timely and appropriate manner.

The report from February 2022 contains statements from the victim about her experience of the act of reconstruction when she was confronted with the

perpetrator, it contains the position of the Public Prosecutor's Office on the reasons for the reconstruction, as well as statements by representatives of a civil society organisation about the position of vulnerable victims in criminal proceedings and the (un)necessity to implement reconstruction in cases of rape. After the announcement that the Public Prosecutor's Office decided to stop the proceedings due to lack of evidence, the voice of the victim is presented in the media only through the mother's statements that the last decision further worsened the victim's health and isolated her from communication and socialisation.

Reports about the case are focused on what happened to the victim of the violence, repeating her position of frightened, ashamed and a person with impaired health. The perpetrator of the violence is invisible in the texts covering the case from its actualisation in February 2021, until the announcements about the action and decision of the Public Prosecutor's Office in 2022.

In some of the texts after the last releases following the decision of the Public Prosecutor's Office, media presumably convey the position of the perpetrator, where it is stated: 'The girl

was waiting for justice, just like the defendant, her ex-boyfriend'. With this, media relativize the experience of the victim while the crime was committed, but also for the duration of the procedure, and thus minimize the damage she suffered.

Treating the case as gender-based violence. The analysis showed that, without exception, all media in their reporting, qualify the event as a crime of rape, but do not present it from the perspective of a type of gender-based violence against women. The texts convey short statements from the victim and the institutions, but neither do the questions of the media towards the institutions, nor the answers of the institutions speak about gender-based violence against women. There is no representation of the problem with rape as a cause and consequence of the historical inequality of women and men, and there is a lack of recognition of rape committed in the context of domestic violence as a qualifying element of the crime in the Criminal Code; as well as the state's obligation to harmonise the elements of the crime of rape with international standards. Namely, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Istanbul Convention require that the state harmonises the legislative framework and sanction any act of a sexual nature, with any body part or object on the body of another person without his/ her consent. Consent must be expressed voluntarily as the result of the person's free will, assessed in the context of the circumstances. According to contemporary legal standards, it is a positive obligation of the state to effectively prosecute and punish all non-consensual sexual acts, including those where there is no resistance from the victim.

The reporting about the conducted reconstruction includes broadcasting the statements of the various stakeholders in the case, without analysing the fact how this specific investigative action affects the specific victim and all future rape victims. Again, there is no analysis of modern standards for handling cases of rape as a severe form of gender-based violence and what are the obligations of state institutions to act with due care in the prevention of violence and in the protection of victims when the violence happens. Some media outlets, when addressing the case, talk about the multiple victimisation by the institutions and about putting the victim in a situation to repeat the statement several times and relive the traumatic experience she had as a rape victim.

In March 2022, an online portal continued reporting on the case and informed that the Public Prosecutor's Office made a decision to stop the proceedings against the perpetrator of the rape due to a lack of evidence that the crime of rape was committed, as well as directing the victim to file a complaint with the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office. In the statement from the Prosecutor's Office published in media, it is stated that the perpetrator will not be prosecuted either for the physical injuries and that they direct the victim to petition individual criminal proceedings before the competent court. In the text, there is no analysis of the decision of the Public Prosecutor's Office on the procedure in the case of rape, which, according to modern legal standards, is sufficient if it

was carried out without the consent of the victim. There is also no critical analysis of the decision of the Public Prosecutor's Office not to prosecute the perpetrator for bodily injury committed in the context of domestic violence. It is obvious that the Prosecutor's Office does not treat the case as gender-based violence committed in the context of domestic violence, and the media only neutrally conveyed the information without giving an overview of the broader social and legal context of the problem.

Protection of privacy. Reports in media are followed by disturbing photos of the victim's injuries, and in all texts she is listed by name and surname. Media also published a recording of her audio statement given over the phone to the television station which first reported about the case and it was further shared by other media, and the texts in the news articles were written from its content. Similar to other cases, revealing the survivor's identity leaves room for her prolonged and multiple victimisation, especially since after the information is published in the media, the discussion continues on social networks, where, quite often, victims are subject to condemnation and moralising.

Conclusion

In the past few years, there has been progress in the adoption of policies on national level aimed at prevention of violence and protection of survivors and their reintegration into society. The Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence of 2021 recognises for the first time any form of gender-based violence against women online.

Media are recognised as key stakeholder in the prevention of violence against women and have a legal obligation when creating and broadcasting informative and educational programs to raise awareness among the general public about all forms of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence, to promote gender equality and to influence the elimination of stereotypes about gender roles.

Practically, media have a key role in raising awareness and educating the public about gender based violence. It is especially important that the media themselves recognize this issue as a significant problem that needs to be addressed and appropriately convey it to the audience. This implies continuity in information, inclusion of experts and professionals in various media products and contents and encouraging victims to report incidents to the competent institutions.

By participating in the social dialogue on these issues, the media can be a significant link in the system for tackling gender-based violence. They are important in debunking stereotypes, in exposing motives behind gender-based violence and in promoting accurate and truthful information. On the other hand, the inclusion of institutions and experts in the dialogue that will be launched by media can shed light on the systemic factors that contribute to such violence and pave the way to determining the necessary solutions. It is particularly important to apply an appropriate approach to survivors with respect, taking into account their circumstances and avoiding generalisations that it could lead to further stigmatisation or revictimization.

Unfortunately, topics related to gender-based violence are not given priority in media coverage. The dominance of daily political events, limited resources in the newsrooms, lack of specialised journalists, the absence of sources and the perception that these topics are not of primary importance in informing, contribute to insufficient reporting. Hence the need for changes in the media editorial policy to ensure continuous reporting on gender-based violence in various media formats. Additionally, media can be involved in campaigns, in cooperation with other

relevant actors, in encouraging victims to report this problem, but also in the effective response of the institutions of the system regarding this problem.

There is a need for more comprehensive and continuous reporting on gender-based violence. Stories on this topic usually lack continuity, and the focus on them is short-lived. In order to give a full picture of the problem, it is crucial to investigate its roots, involve institutions and experts and offer recommendations from the relevant stakeholders. Instead of simple and service-oriented information through press releases and short news, media should offer in-depth analysis and research, highlighting the root causes and systemic problems. Including different perspectives can enrich the scope and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the problem.

The influence of social media on the reporting about gender-based violence is a double-edged sword. While they may raise awareness of the problem, they also serve as platforms for spreading disinformation, hate speech, victim-blaming comments, and online bullying. All of this has a negative impact on journalism, especially when media publish their content on social networks or, when they download information from there and include it into their products. Hence, journalists should critically evaluate information before reporting and ensure that it is verified by reliable sources.

Ethics should be a priority in informing about gender-based violence. Journalists should protect the privacy and identity of survivors and to avoid sensationalism. However, sensationalist reporting is still very present, especially in online media. One of the reasons is that there is a culture of the so-called 'clickbait' journalism, i.e. the frequent recourse to attention-grabbing headlines to increase the number of clicks and views of certain contents. Thus, focusing on shocking or dramatic moments rather than systemic issues distorts the true picture on gender-based violence. Furthermore, sensationalism often results from the rapid spread of information at the expense of accuracy and ethics. The sensationalists stories quickly go viral before the facts are even checked. Sensational reporting often relies on harmful stereotypes and generalized narratives, leading to a distorted picture about gender-based violence and this affects the strengthening of harmful myths and misconceptions.

Overall, media have a very significant role in tackling this problem by raising awareness, educating the public, encouraging social dialogue and correct and truthful reporting. By prioritizing this topic, comprehensive information and respecting ethical standards, media can largely contribute in the fight against gender-based violence and creating a safer society for all.

Recommendations and Guidelines for Media Reporting on Gender-Based Violence

- ▶ **Gender-based violence should be treated as detrimental to human rights, because it is a violation of the fundamental rights of individuals to life, security, dignity and equality.** Media should be aware that they have an obligation to contribute in the prevention of violence in accordance with the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. The encouragement in the Law for media to be involved in the prevention of violence at the same time implies that freedom of expression and independence of media should be respected, especially in regard to editorial independence. In this context, media can highlight international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration on human rights³⁵, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination³⁶ and the Istanbul Convention, which condemn and address gender-based violence.
- ▶ **Problems connected with gender-based violence should not be reported as isolated incidents.** It is a problem that is deeply rooted in social structures and cultural norms. It is encouraged and maintained through gender inequality and the continued repetition of harmful attitudes towards men and women, which are manifested in various forms, such as domestic violence, sexual assault, harassment, human trafficking,

etc. It is especially important to highlight the broader context related to gender-based violence and explain it as a problem with far-reaching consequences for the entire society. Gender-based violence can hinder economic development, burden the health system, perpetuate the cycle of violence and poverty, etc. Journalists should investigate and expose the root causes, as well as demystify harmful social norms. Gender norms play a major role in fuelling gender-based violence. These are social expectations and attitudes about how people of a certain gender should behave and can contribute to the perpetuation of gender-based violence. For example, norms that promote male dominance and aggression or norms that trivialize violence against women may contribute to the perpetuation of a culture that allows gender-based violence. Hence, journalists should be aware about these norms and how they can influence the occurrence and perception of gender-based violence. When reporting on a case of gender-based violence against women, journalists should explore attitudes towards gender roles, power dynamics, as well as advocate for systemic change to prevent future cases of gender-based violence. It may include support to policies and programmes aimed at gender equality, raising awareness of the importance of education and economic empowerment

³⁵ [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(full version\) - Manual for Human Rights Education with Young people \(coe.int\)](https://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/declaration_of_human_rights_full_version.pdf)

³⁶ <https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/WBStorage/Files/priracnik.pdf>

of women, as well as promoting strategies for prevention and response to violence.

► **Continuous reporting about the problem with gender-based violence.**

Journalists should follow the cases of gender-based violence, the course of legal proceedings, the investigation and commitments to fight impunity. Moreover, they should shed light on the challenges survivors face in accessing the justice system. Through providing timely information of public interest, a complete picture of the problem will be given and its impact on survivors and society. Regular monitoring and reporting on a specific case of violence increases the responsibility and accountability of institutions to act with due care in the investigation, prosecution and punishment of the perpetrators. Even when there are no ongoing cases to report, journalists can analyse the work of institutions, promote assistance and support services for women victims of gender-based violence, methods of reporting and protection, etc.³⁷ The content produced by journalists should ideally have calls to action, including

information on available support and services³⁸.

► **Media should provide information for preventive measures, about available support services and legal protection for victims of gender-based violence.**

Continuous and close cooperation with the institutions and civil society organisations that provide the services is important in order to obtain accurate and timely information about the type and capacity of services and possible challenges that exist, affecting the number and quality of the services. Media, as a source of information about available services, funded and supported by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy can use the ministry website³⁹, while information about associations and lawyers who provide free legal assistance to victims is available on the website of the Ministry of Justice⁴⁰.

► **Reporting on gender-based violence underscores comprehensive approach by offering a wide range of different perspectives (of experts, representatives of state institutions, the civil society, representatives**

³⁷ Dekic, S. (2017) Media coverage of gender based violence handbook, UN Women, <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/09/media-coverage-of-gender-based-violence--handbook-and-training-of-trainers> [UN woman prirucnik nasilje nad zenama-EN-WEB.pdf (unwomen.org)]

³⁸ UN Women, UNFPA, UNICEF, Responsible representation and reporting of violence against women and violence against children - guidelines for media professionals, bit.ly/3Puni1q

³⁹ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy <https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/uslugi-i-prava.nspX>

⁴⁰ Ministry of Justice <https://www.pravda.gov.mk/usluga/11> [EN pravda.gov.mk/usluga/11]

of marginalised communities and the survivors themselves, etc.) This implies providing the right context and considering the issue about gender norms, but also the ways in which some aspects of the social and political identities of individuals such as gender, race, sexuality and others can be mutually combined in the creation of unique patterns of discrimination and violence, etc. Experts can help explain the causes and consequences of gender-based violence, representatives of state institutions can talk about legal and institutional responses to such violence, representatives of civil society organisations for the support to the survivors and for the advocacy for changes, while, representatives of the marginalised communities can provide context for how violence disproportionately affects specific marginalised groups less favourably, which is usually not visible in the media. What is also equally important is to include perspectives of the survivors themselves, to provide a first-hand account of the problems and issues. In this context, it is crucial to handle their stories carefully, in order to prevent retraumatization or harm.

- ▶ **Avoid sensationalist approach in reporting and give priority to correct, balanced and objective reporting about this problem.** A sensationalist approach to reporting often involves the inclusion of too many graphic descriptions, excessive focus on the details of the violence or, on the other

hand, presenting the stories in a way that elicits shock or outrage rather than understanding and empathy. Misrepresentation of statistical data is also an example of sensationalist reporting, which maybe it is done either to create the impression that gender-based violence is less present than it really is, or to exaggerate the problem. On the other hand, reporting in a way that subtly or overtly shifts blame to the victim, such as focusing on clothing, past sexual history, or behaviour preceding the incident, is also sensationalistic and harmful. Damage can also be caused by revealing names or explicit details of the private life of persons that are often irrelevant to the story. Sensational reporting can lead to the trivialisation of the problem, strengthening of stereotypes or to cause harm or revictimization of survivors. Instead, journalists are expected to present the facts clearly and respectfully, objectively present the lived experience, giving priority to the dignity and privacy of the person.

- ▶ **Cautiously verify information and statistical data, by using reliable and relevant sources.** Accuracy is a key principle in journalistic reporting. Journalists should strive to provide accurate information to help citizens understand complex issues. This entails verifying the source of any statistics or information that is used in reporting. The use of inaccurate or misinformation can distort public perceptions of this problem, mislead the public, and even

contribute to reinforcing stereotypes. Careful checking of information and the use of confidential and reliable sources of information contributes to informed public discourse about gender-based violence. This can inspire a deeper understanding of the problem, instigate constructive debate and potentially lead to positive changes in the society.

- **Respect privacy of the survivors and their loved ones.** Journalists should refrain from revealing the identity, personal information or any details that could potentially be disclosed to lead to their identification. They should respect their right to privacy and avoid retraumatizing them by disclosing sensitive information without their explicit consent. In reporting on gender-based violence, above all, it is necessary to adhere to the general provisions in the Code for Ethics of Journalists Particularly Article 7⁴¹, which underlines the need to protect privacy. Media are expected to protect not only the identity and privacy of victims, i.e. survivors of gender-based violence, but also of their loved ones. Respect for privacy is important for several reasons. First, it avoids revictimization. Unwanted public attention may additionally reinforce the trauma experienced by survivors of gender-based violence. Disclosing sensitive information without survivors' consent can not only lead to retraumatization, but also cause survivors to feel insulted,

belittled, or condemned by the public. Furthermore, respecting privacy helps prevent retaliation or further harm to survivors. Revealing survivors' identities can potentially expose them to retaliation from their abusers or lead to further stigmatisation. In addition, by respecting the privacy in reporting, other survivors are encouraged to report their problem. If the survivors know that their privacy will be respected, they are more likely to come forward and share their experiences, which, among other things, raises awareness of gender-based violence. To ensure adherence to these principles, journalists should seek explicit consent from survivors before sharing any potential details that can identify the person. Furthermore, it is desirable to use pseudonyms or general descriptions that do not reveal the identity of survivors. For example, instead of indicating the identity, a description can be used like '35-year-old woman from the town'. When talking about the incident, there should be a focus on the wider problem of gender-based violence, rather than on potential specifics and identifying elements of the survivor's experience.

- **Media must prioritize the confidentiality, security, safety and protection from harm of women survivors of violence.** In many cases, women who have survived violence share their experiences with journalists in confidence. It is vital that this trust

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Code of Ethics of Journalists of Macedonia, CODE OF ETHICS OF JOURNALISTS – Здружение на новинари на Македонија (znm.org.mk)

is respected. The journalists should not share confidential information without explicit permission from the woman in question and the limits of confidentiality should be made clear from the start. Women survivors of violence may be at risk of further violence or harassment if their stories are made public. Journalists must ensure that their reporting does not increase this risk. This includes considering the potential impact of the story on the woman's safety, taking steps to protect her identity if necessary, and taking precautions when meeting her in person or communicating online. The safety of women survivors of violence should be a primary concern for journalists. This, among other things, means ensuring that a woman is not put at risk by the reporting process, including not being put at risk of potential retaliation from the perpetrator of the violence. In addition, journalists should take steps for safety and comfort during interviews. Journalists, first of all, need to obtain consent for interviews. Interlocutors should be informed of the consequences of their actions, in order to make a decision whether to testify publicly or to protect themselves with anonymity. This is especially important with the online media where the news with the victim's data will be kept for long period in the public space and will be shared more easily with a larger audience. There should also be a clear

agreement about what information will be treated with confidentiality and that which can be published⁴². Journalists should actively and carefully interview survivors, without making value judgments and without interrupting and rushing them. Questions should be asked carefully to get a picture of the wider context of the problem.

- **Avoid improper visualisation of journalistic stories related to gender-based violence.** Although visual images can be powerful storytelling tools, they must be used carefully to avoid retraumatizing survivors, causing distress in audiences, or perpetuating harmful stereotypes or myths. Using explicit images or videos depicting the act of violence should be avoided. For example, the photo of the crime scene with visible blood or bruising and a battered face can be deeply distressing and potentially retraumatizing for survivors. Publishing conversations between the victim and the perpetrator or the harassing speech and hate speech of the perpetrator towards the victim in cases of online violence, in fact, represents the place and manner of committing the violence that retraumatizes the victim. Journalists should also be careful with visuals that would inadvertently blame the victim or suggest that she could have avoided the violence. For example, posting an image of a naked woman

42 Тунева, М., Нушкова А.А [2021] Прирачник за родово сензитивно известување во медиумите, ХОПС Опции за здрав живот Скопје, <https://hops.org.mk/prirachnik-za-rodovo-senzitivno-izvestuvanje/>

within content about sexual assault can perpetuate the harmful myth that a woman's clothing or behaviour of the victims in some way causes violence. Further on, to avoid using images that perpetuate stereotypes about gender-based violence. For example, visuals should not only portray women as victims and men as perpetrators. They should be a reflection of the reality that gender-based violence can affect anyone, regardless of sex, age, ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Thus, one should avoid posting pictures or recordings that could reveal the identity of survivors without their explicit consent. For example, a photo of their home, work place or other locations may endanger the safety and privacy of survivors. Using dramatic visuals that may sensationalize or trivialize the problem should be avoided. For example, the image of a woman in distress being 'rescued' by a man may support harmful narratives that women need to be rescued, rather than emphasizing the importance of systemic change to prevent violence. Instead, journalists should strive to use visuals that humanize survivors, promote empathy, and accurately represent the issue in question. For example, instead of graphically depicting violence, violence can be symbolized by presenting a picture of a broken piece of jewellery, or torn clothes. With the survivors' consent, images of them can be used that highlight their resilience and recovery, rather than their sacrifice. It is recommended that journalists use

data visualization or infographics to help readers or viewers understand the prevalence and impact of gender-based violence. It is also useful to show images of peaceful protests, community solidarity or support services to emphasize solutions and collective action against gender-based violence.

► **Use neutral vocabulary in reporting.**

Journalists should be careful about the terms they use to describe individuals who have suffered gender-based violence. While the term 'victim' is technically correct, it is recommended to use the term 'survivor' because it emphasizes resilience and recovery. At best, it is recommended to use terminology that is acceptable to the individual. Using language that might blame the survivor or minimize the seriousness of the crime should be avoided. For example, instead of saying 'she claims' or 'her allegations are', which can cast doubt on the survivor, it is better to use neutral terms like 'she reported' or 'stated.' It is necessary to use specific and correct terms to describe the violence that occurred. Rather than using vague terms such as 'incident' or 'misconduct', precise terms such as 'rape', 'sexual assault', or 'domestic violence' should be used as appropriate and substantiated. Using language that objectifies or dehumanizes survivors should be avoided. For example, for survivors of sex trafficking terms like 'prostitute' or 'sex worker', should not be used, as it can lead to stigmatization. Instead,

'individuals exploited in the sex trade' can be used. Journalists should refrain from using overly graphic or sensationalist vocabulary that may retraumatize survivors or use their experiences for shock value of their story. For example, terms like 'sex scandal' or 'terrible affair' when sexual violence is reported should be avoided.

- ▶ **Exercise caution when using information from social networks.** When journalists use information from social networks to report on gender-based violence, they must exercise extreme caution and respect ethical standards. This includes combating disinformation, moderating harmful comments and publishing appropriate content. Before using any information from social networks, journalists must verify its accuracy. Disinformation or false claims can cause harm, damage reputation and potentially incite situations of violence. For example, a post accusing someone of violence should be checked by using reliable sources before being published as fact. Journalists should not share personal information, images or stories from social networks without the express consent of the person involved. For example, if a survivor of gender-based violence shares her story on a social network, it is crucial to ask her for permission before using her words or images in an article. Journalists often share stories on social media, where readers can leave their comments. These comments should be carefully moderated to prevent spreading hate

speech, victim blaming or harassment. Journalists can play a role in combating disinformation on social media by fact-checking and providing accurate information. For example, if a widely shared post contains a myth about gender-based violence, a journalist can write a piece that debunks the myth and publish accurate information. Furthermore, journalists can use their social media profiles to promote constructive dialogue to address the issue of gender-based violence. For example, a journalist can write a post inviting readers to share their thoughts on how to prevent gender-based violence, indicating that comments should be moderate and focused on solutions. Besides, when reporting on gender-based violence, journalists can use social media to share useful information and resources for survivors, such as hotlines, counselling services and contacts from organisations providing legal aid.

- ▶ **Recognise and investigate intersectional aspects of gender-based violence.** In regard to gender-based violence, intersectionality means that individuals experience violence in ways that are shaped by their different identities and social status. For example, ethnicity can significantly influence a person's experience with gender-based violence. Women from certain ethnic non-majority groups may be exposed more frequently to violence due to systemic racism and discrimination. Their experiences can

be influenced by cultural norms and practices, language barriers or lack of access to appropriate support services. Furthermore, religious beliefs may also intersect with experiences of gender-based violence. For example, some religious doctrines or interpretations may be used to justify or condone violence. On the other hand, some religious communities may provide strong support networks for survivors. Poverty and low socio-economic status can increase vulnerability in relation to gender-based violence. Economic dependence is often a factor in staying in a particular community and suffering violence. Conversely, those with a higher socio-economic status may feel constrained to report a problem of gender-based violence, trying to maintain the status of someone with a 'perfect' family life. Individuals with disabilities may also experience higher rates of gender-based violence in comparison with those without disabilities. They may also face additional barriers in accessing support services, such as physical accessibility issues, communication barriers or discrimination. Other aspects of identity, such as age, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, etc., also intersect with experiences of gender-based violence. For example, transgender people face extremely high rates of violence, and young or older people are also vulnerable to this problem due to age. Therefore, recognising intersectionality in reporting can

provide a more accurate picture of this highly complex issue. Journalists should make efforts to include voices that are often marginalised or excluded from the mainstream discourse on gender-based violence. This can be done by featuring stories from survivors from ethnic non-majority communities, individuals with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals and others. Intersectional reporting can help debunk harmful stereotypes and prejudices in regard to who experiences gender-based violence. By showing different survival experiences, journalists can help to debunk assumptions and increase understanding. Reporting that recognizes intersectionality can also help promote more inclusive and effective solutions to gender-based violence. By highlighting the challenges faced by different groups, journalists can encourage the development of support services that are accessible and relevant to all survivors, regardless of their identity or social status.

